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Iran-Iraq: The Battle For Basrah

Summary

With at least 350,000 Iranian and Iraqi troops confronting each other, the struggle underway near Basrah promises to be the largest land battle since the Korean War. Iran apparently intends to push to the Shatt al Arab opposite Basrah, inflicting a massive defeat on the Iraqi troops--as many as eight reinforced divisions--defending the city. Tehran undoubtedly hopes that a defeat of this magnitude will spark the overthrow of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. If a coup in Baghdad does not occur, or the Iraqi Army is routed, Iran may push its attack across the Shatt.

The morale of Iraq's troops and the ability of its commanders to avoid mistakes will be crucial to Iraq's prospects for a successful defense. Reporting on Iraqi troop morale in recent weeks has been contradictory. Iraqi forces will be fighting in defense of their own soil for the first time in the war and may fight harder than in Iran. Troop morale probably is fragile, however, and is likely to plummet quickly if the Iranians achieve an early breakthrough. Iraqi commanders do not appear to have improved their performance since the fall of Khorramshahr and there are weak spots in critical areas of the Iraqi defenses northeast of Basrah. For this reason we estimate the Iranians will be able to achieve a breakthrough, out maneuver the Iraqis, and drive to the Shatt al Arab, albeit at the cost of heavy casualties.

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Background

Since late May 1981 Iranian troops have consistently defeated the Iraqis in a series of engagements which have grown steadily in size and ferocity. By this past spring the Iranians were employing their forces on a large-scale. During the battle of Dezful in March some 50,000 Iranian troops and an unknown number of irregulars* launched a two-pronged assault over 80 kilometers of the front. The fighting lasted about two weeks. In May some 70,000 Iranian troops, reinforced with irregulars, mounted a two pronged offensive north of Khorramshahr along some 60 kilometers of the front. The fighting lasted four weeks.

Iraqi regular units fought hard during these attacks, but mistakes by senior Iraqi commanders and low troop morale, particularly among militia and reserve forces, were crucial to Iran's success. Senior Iraqi commanders failed to deploy their troops properly before both the battles of Dezful and Khorramshahr, stationing poorly trained militia and reserve forces at critical points on the battlefield. Reserves were committed either too early or too late and at the wrong places. Iraqi troops, particularly the militia and reserve forces, apparently have been reluctant to die for Iranian territory. Saddam has consistently indicated he would return to Iran in a peace settlement. As a result, the reserve and militia troops often abandoned their positions at critical times.

Iranian Plans

the Iranian assault will involve some 75,000 regular troops and probably at least as many irregulars attacking along a 90 kilometer front. The troops will be supported by about 300 pieces of artillery and 400 armored vehicles. Iraq has over 100,000 regular troops supported by 250 artillery pieces and some 900 armored vehicles defending the city. Baghdad's forces also have constructed an elaborate system of trenches, anti-tank ditches, and berms along the border during the past month in addition to a flooding an existing canal.

* The exact number of irregulars involved in Iranian military operations is unknown, but apparently at least equal to the number of regular troops involved in any offensive.

Iran also may launch diversionary attacks along the border east of Al Amarah and near Qasr-e Shirin. Only modest Iranian forces are stationed in these locations and the attacks will be limited.

Iran will attack all along the border opposite Basrah, but its main effort will be along three axes. An Iranian armored division has been concentrated opposite & weakpoint in Iraq's defenses about 45 kilometers northeast of Basrah where both the anti-tank ditch and trenches are incomplete. Once through this "gap" in the defenses the division probably will try to roll-up Iraqi defenders to the north and south. The division also may try to reach the bridges across the Shatt al Arab and across the flooded canal northeast of the city, key choke points on Iraqi lines of retreat.

A second thrust probably will be made by two infantry divisions closer to the Shatt al Arab. The northern most of these two divisions will try to reach the bridges across the flooded canal, while the southern most division tries to advance south of the canal. An advance of about ten kilometers south of the canal would flank nearly all Iraqi defenses farther north and threaten the roads leading from Basrah to the Iraqi forces.

A third, and probably less intense push, likely will be made by an armored division against the Iraqi forces farthest north along the border. The attack will be aimed at pinning down these forces. Tehran probably does not expect a breakthrough here because Iraqi defenses in this sector are well prepared.

Iran probably will not push beyond the Shatt al Arab opposite Basrah, in the initial phases of its attack unless the Iraqis collapse quickly. There is no indication that the Iranians are preparing the types of bridges needed to cross the Shatt. In addition, if the Iranians encounter stubborn Iraqi resistance and the fighting is prolonged, Tehran's forces would need time to regroup and resupply before crossing the Shatt.

The Iranians probably hope that an advance to the Shatt and a crushing defeat for the Iraqi Army will spark a coup against Saddam Hussein or possibly a Shia uprising in Basrah. In that event Iranian units could enter the city unopposed. In any case, the city, Iraq's second largest, would be completely at the mercy of Iranian artillery fire from across the Shatt.

Should Saddam not fall, the Iranians will have to decide whether to cross the Shatt or to move forces north and push into Iraq east of Al Amarah or near Qusayr al-Sharqiyah. If the Iranians do cross the Shatt they likely will swing south and west of the city to surround it. They probably will try to avoid a direct assault on the city itself to avoid inflicting a large number of casualties on Iraqi Shia civilians--the very people Iran claims to be liberating--and to avoid costly street fighting. An advance south and west of the city probably would result in large numbers of Iraqi civilian and military refugees fleeing into Kuwait, Iranian forces arriving at the Kuwaiti border, and the Iranians moving into Iraq's main oilfields in the south.

Unless the Iraqi Army collapses, there is almost no chance of an Iranian advance toward the Shia holy shrines at Najaf or Karbala or an advance on Baghdad in the near term because of logistic difficulties.

Iraqi Prospects

Iraq's chances of staving off defeat rest on the ability of its commanders to avoid making crucial mistakes and on the morale of its troops. The outlook is not good. Iraqi commanders have not made any move to close the "gap" in their defenses. Although the possibility exists that the weakpoint is actually a trap, this is not likely based on Iraq's performance in the war thus far. Baghdad also has let the Iranians achieve a numerical superiority in artillery, and Iranian use of artillery is far more effective than Iraq's. Moreover, the Iraqis may have failed to substantially reinforce their armored units around Basrah with crack infantry troops, a crucial failing in past battles.

Although reporting has been contradictory, Iraqi troop morale probably has improved somewhat since the withdrawal from Iran and Baghdad's forces will be defending their own territory for the first time in the war. Nonetheless, morale will plummet quickly should the Iranians achieve a breakthrough and Iraqi units once again find themselves outflanked, forced to retreat, or surrounded.

If the Iraqis hold initially, however, a long grueling battle is likely to ensue. The concentration of Iraqi forces around Basrah is greater than in any previous battle. Large numbers of reinforcements are available and concentrated artillery fire and bombing attacks could inflict massive losses on the Iranians and force Tehran to rethink its strategy.

